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The Motives of the Feminist #MeToo Movement in Václav Havel's Plays*

Jan Čulík 

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK



ABSTRACT

Václav Havel (1936–2011) was for many people in the Czech Republic the most significant and certainly the most revered cultural and political figure of the past half a century. In the 1960s, Havel became the most important representative of East European absurd drama. His work was banned after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Gradually, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Havel emerged as one of the most important Czechoslovak dissidents and after the fall of communism in 1989, he was elected President of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic. In all, Havel wrote 13 plays. In them, he criticizes the shameless and arrogant quest for power, which is usually conducted by the abuse of language. This article, however, is the first in the history of criticism of Havel's plays which points out that from as early as the 1960s, Havel systematically included scenes of sexual manipulation of young women by ageing men, in his plays, thus anticipating the #MeToo movement by many decades.

KEYWORDS

MeToo; feminism; Czech playwrights; Czechoslovakia; Václav Havel; plays by Václav Havel

Václav Havel (1936–2011) was the most revered public figure in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic in the post-communist period, although recently, he has also become a subject of hatred from populists and extreme right-wing activists. He was born into an upper-middle-class family of successful entrepreneurs in interwar Czechoslovakia. Because of his social origins, he was ostracized by the regime after the 1948 communist takeover and found it very difficult to acquire university education. Nevertheless, in the liberal 1960s, he became an important playwright: he was perhaps the most significant author of East European absurd drama,¹ which primarily criticized and satirized the practices of the Czechoslovak communist regime. After the Czechoslovak 'Prague Spring' was suppressed by the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, Havel became prominent in the Czechoslovak dissident movement. While he continued to write plays, he was also the author of sociological/political essays in which he analysed the stagnant Czechoslovak post-

CONTACT Jan Čulík  jan.culik@glasgow.ac.uk  School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland, UK

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invasion regime of the 1970s and 1980s. From 1979 until 1983 he was in prison where he almost died. After the fall of communism, he was elected first Czechoslovak President and then, after the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent countries, Czech President, a post which he held until 2003.

When Havel became President, he stopped writing plays – with the exception of his last play, *Odházení* (*Leaving*, 2007), which he also turned into a film (2011). During his presidential tenure he was sometimes criticized for making moral speeches to the nation (published in a series of volumes) while Czech post-communist oligarchs were stealing most of the valuable property that existed in the Czech Republic.² It was not necessarily Havel's fault in that the post of Czech President is largely ceremonial, without political powers. It was not until after Havel's resignation that he came to be properly appreciated, because his successors, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman proved to be much, much worse.

The Czech Republic has a rather questionable track record in the field of gender equality. Partially, this may be due to the fact that the rights of women were trumpeted about (although not necessarily adhered to) by the Czechoslovak communist regime, so after its fall, not many people were prepared to ensure that women's rights were protected. It is only recently and only amongst the younger generation that women's rights are being taken seriously. In the current right-of-centre Czech government an important role is played by the Catholic People's Party (KDU–ČSL) and its politicians who hold several key ministries, have, in the summer of 2022, rather disturbingly, displayed their tendencies to send women back to the kitchen. While there is an almost absolute gender equality in the Czech Republic in the field of education, once women leave school and university, it is a different matter. According to the OECD 2020 Global Gender Gap Index Rankings,³ in the field of Economic Participation and Opportunity, the Czech Republic is 87th.

Gender inequality has been a major issue in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic for years and found its way even into Václav Havel's plays. Havel's bibliography is vast, yet authors mostly deal with the political impact and the philosophical meaning of his writings and actions. No one has yet addressed that Václav Havel, in a number of his plays, quite systematically deals with and parodies the problematic efforts of ageing men of influence to keep a mistress alongside a wife and to get perhaps every young girl into bed. For the authors who deal with Havel's politics and philosophy, this seems perhaps a frivolous topic, yet it is an issue that has become very topical in recent times, when women have finally managed to assert their voice, in the West, and to some extent (this applies primarily to younger women) also in the Czech Republic, especially since the #MeToo movement began in 2017. It may seem surprising that this theme has appeared repeatedly in Havel's plays since the 1960s. Its presence can be interpreted as part of Havel's wider analysis of the efforts of powerful individuals to oppress their fellow human beings for their own self-gratification.

Many commentators over the years have pointed out that Havel's dramas are first and foremost an analysis and critique of language. Beginning with *Zahradní slavnost* (*The Garden Party*),⁴ which is a brutal analysis of the ideological 'Newspeak' used by the communist regime, Havel's plays point out that ideological, stilted language is used as a tool to negate reality and strengthen power. The goal is almost always the personal gain of the powerful and their utterly primitive selfishness and self-indulgence.

However, in the long decades since Havel's plays were written, no one has pointed out that the same mechanism, according to Havel's plays, operates not only in the political sphere but

also in relations between the sexes. Men, in their relationships with women (who are almost always subordinated to them) abuse language to manipulate them for their own benefit.⁵

From a close reading of Havel's texts, it can be concluded that much of what Havel addressed in his plays comes from his personal experience. Havel makes fun of an artificial, convoluted way of expressing oneself, but we know well that he sometimes fell into this way of writing himself (*Dopisy Olze* [*Letters to Olga*]⁶). In the same way, Havel mocks the selfish and lustful behaviour of ageing men towards young women, but he is known to have sometimes behaved that way himself.

Havel's 12 plays,⁷ written before the fall of communism, form four relatively self-contained units, each containing a trio of plays which are always connected to a particular theme and era. Each of these trios of plays in each era introduces key themes, which are then often reworked and developed, in Havel's plays from later eras. Thus, a polyphonic interaction of several motifs gradually emerges. In the first trio of dramas from the 1960s (*Zahradní slavnost* [*The Garden Party*, 1964], *Vyrozumění* [*The Memorandum*, 1965] and *Ztížená možnost soustředění* [*The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, 1968]), Havel points to the role of ideological language as an elevator to power and wealth. Marxist ideology, disseminated in convoluted language (satirized in both *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*), promised to lead to equality for all citizens. Paradoxically, this noble ideal had been subverted. Instead, ideological language was used as a tool to oppress people, to create obstacles in their lives, to prevent their self-actualization, and to gain power and wealth. The essential feature of the powerful which is highlighted in these plays is their blatant self-serving motivation. The text emphasizes this by pointing out that convoluted ideological language, used as an instrument of oppression, is often applied in the context of shopping and lunches ('May I go and get the rolls?'⁸ 'Here are the onions, comrade chairwoman'⁹ 'Is it true that there is goose for lunch today?'¹⁰). The juxtaposition of ideological language and an obsessive concern with food is a signal that the users of ideological language are only concerned with their own material gain. In two of these first three plays (*The Memorandum*, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*), we find for the first time the abuse of women for the benefit of powerful men.

The second series of Havel's dramas was written during the first stage of 'normalisation'¹¹ after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, when Havel became a banned figure and lost contact with the audience at Prague's Divadlo Na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade), where in the 1960s, he had been able to alter the text of his plays and incorporate gags into them according to the reactions of the audience. At this time, Havel wrote somewhat theoretical plays *Spiklenci* (*The Conspirators*, 1971) and *Horský hotel* (*The Mountain Hotel*, 1976). In these, Havel further developed his analysis of the actions of individuals trying to gain power and introduced the new theme of manipulative individuals always lying to everyone as another method of gaining power. The theme of sex in relation to power also appears in *Spiklenci*, with the conspirator Helga willing to have an affair with any man who wields power. Livelier than the previous two plays was Havel's version of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* or *Žebrácká opera* (1975), where the method of lying by everyone everywhere to everyone is brought to such perfection that it is impossible to ascertain what are the facts. Havel's *The Beggar's Opera* also explores the motif of the idealist who is always punished in the end. This motif first appeared in *Vyrozumění* and then it occurs repeatedly in Havel's other plays. It is noteworthy that by ironically introducing this motif (the idealistic thief Filch in *Žebrácká*

opera is executed), Havel is perhaps quite close to the views prevalent in his society. As an analysis of Czech post-Communist feature films has revealed, Czech society reacts furiously and negatively to any heroic behaviour of its members (see, for example, the film *Želary*¹²). The theme of hostility towards dissident heroes also appears in Havel's one-act plays from the second half of the 1970s.

Havel's one-act plays *Vernisáž* (*Private View*, 1975), *Audience* (1975) and *Protest* (1978) deal with the relationship of much of the normalization society towards dissidents. These plays are stunningly realistic, hence their international success. They record mainly, without comment, how people behaved during the 'normalisation' period, without necessarily explicitly expressing a critical attitude towards non-dissident citizens who lived 'in the official structures' and were forced to collaborate with the regime in order to survive. To some extent, *Audience* can even be interpreted as a play that sympathizes with the 'common man' living in the normalization society. The maltster, who is not a celebrity like the dissident writer Ferdinand and is therefore not protected from the malice of the authorities says, 'One fine day you will go back to your actresses, you'll boast about the time you worked here rolling barrels, showing off what a fine big he-man you are – but what about me, eh? What about me?'.¹³ Indeed, this is what happened to Havel, who became President, while so many ordinary Czech were wondering what their lives had been worth.

In Havel's penultimate writing period, from the time of his return from prison in the early 1980s until the fall of communism in 1989, three more dramatic texts were written, *Largo desolato*,¹⁴ *Pokoušení* (*Temptation*)¹⁵ and *Asanace* (*Redevelopment*),¹⁶ in which the author had completely lost his original optimism from the early years of his work in the 1960s.¹⁷ The story of the traumatized dissident Leopold Kopřiva in *Largo desolato*, like Havel's previous play *Protest*, highlights again the motif of dissent as a profession to which society has become accustomed, and like *Redevelopment*, it paints a depressing view of a decaying communist society in its final stages. In *Largo desolato* and *Temptation*, the male characters again almost automatically resort to seducing younger women, this time as an escape from their problematic existence. What is interesting in *Largo desolato* is Leopold Kopřiva's emphasis on the momentary state of his bodily functions as a kind of material, non-sexual variation on the motifs of self-indulgence found in Havel's earlier plays.

Havel's post-communist play *Odcházení* (*Leaving*, 2007), which Václav Havel also turned into a feature film,¹⁸ is again about the struggle for power, about lying, and about the crippling fear of losing influence and possessions. It is just as pessimistic as Havel's plays from the previous period. This time, Havel's pessimism is based on his sobering experience of life in the post-communist era. In *Odcházení*, Havel's characters again return anxiously to the subject of food during their pompous (but in fact platitudinous) conversations, as the question of cooking potatoes becomes a key issue for them.

But How Did the Theme of #MeToo Evolve and What Transformations Did It Go Through During Havel's Writing Career?

The first time something similar to the #MeToo motif appears – still relatively faintly – is in Havel's *Vyrozumění*, in which Director Gross, sensing subliminally the possibility of a sexual relationship with his secretary Maria, who likes him, uses this sexual attraction to make her break the rules and translate an incomprehensible notification written in the

newly introduced 'official' language *ptydepe* for him. This is a relationship of a superior to a subordinate employee, and it is problematic because it always suggests an abuse of power. This secretary Maria is also Havel's first decent, ethical and idealistic character, and therefore must be destroyed. When Deputy Baláš decides that Maria will be fired for her unauthorized translation, Director Gross does not stand up for her, he leaves her in the lurch. It inspires the first of Havel's buck-passing 'super-monologues', explaining why nothing can be done:

Dear Maria! We are living in a strange, complex epoch! (...) What matters now is that you must not lose your hope, your love of life and your trust in people. (...) I know it is absurd, dear Maria but I must go and have lunch. So – goodbye! Be good!¹⁹

At the end of his speech, Gross thus openly admits to his own self-indulgence and joins the other characters in the play who strive for influence and gaining power by any means.

The play *Ztížená možnost soustředění* again critiques the abuse of convoluted ideological language for the purposes of self-interest. The target of the criticism this time is not 'bureaucrats',²⁰ functioning as a metaphor for regime politicians, but parasitic so-called 'scientists' and their banal and verbose speeches, the supposed outputs of their scientific work, but in fact a chaotic verbal hotchpotch of nonsense. The play signals that the 'scientist' Huml and his team are parasites. They do not do original scientific work. They are utterly incompetent: the only thing that they have produced is a completely useless, moody robot named Puzuk. Something else entirely is the focus of their attention: first and foremost, again, food ('Have we some honey?' – 'Fond of fruit?' – 'I saw your supplies in the kitchen' – 'Some beer?' – 'Why don't you take some mustard?'²¹) and then sex. Sexual relations are openly mocked in the play, as in almost identical dialogues the 'scientist' Huml is trying to convince both his wife and his mistress that he will break up with the other woman as soon as possible, while always reporting to the other partner about the intimate details of his encounter with her rival.

HUML: You know very well that I don't sleep with her so often, after all, we have nowhere to go. We usually end up by kissing; at the very most I might touch her breasts a bit. Pass me a roll, will you?²²

The cynical matter-of-factness with which Huml reports to his women these details is astonishing, as are his stereotypical attempts at emotional manipulation of the woman he desires: ('Renata. Kitty-cat. Come on! Remember the Dolomites? In that old kiln?'²³). There is absolutely no emotion involved, only a completely mechanical, self-indulgent satisfaction of physical needs. Both women tolerate Huml's explanations that he is also having an affair with the other woman, even though they occasionally, mildly, express signs of jealousy. This is a signal that both the wife and the mistress are totally subordinated to the man. While dictating his platitudes 'for the radio', Huml also sexually assaults his secretary who is writing down his 'speeches' in shorthand. These sexual assaults take place similarly to those described in USA courts decades later by women participating in the #MeToo protest movement. Is Havel the first Czech author to record such an 'office' assault?

Longish pause. Suddenly, Huml leaps towards Blanka, falls on his knees, grabs her shoulders and tries to kiss her. Blanka is startled and cries out. A short struggle ensues, Huml attempting to put his arms around Blanka and kiss her, Blanka resists, finally she gives him a push, Huml loses his balance and falls down. Blanka jumps up.

BLANKA: You should be ashamed of yourself, Dr. Huml!

*Blanka, alarmed, runs out by the back door.*²⁴

This happens several times, meanwhile Huml asks Blanka intimate questions, asks her about her boyfriend, demands to know what she thinks of him, and then enquires directly:

'Are you a virgin?'

'What?'

'I said, are you a virgin?'

'I beg your pardon!'

'It's kindly meant. I ask as your friend – '.²⁵

No one dwells on how unpleasant it must be for Blanka to be forced to work in such an environment. The victim's point of view is absent, but Havel at least records these telling scenes. Huml's euphemistic excuses of 'I ask as your friend' and repeated unfulfilled commitments ('Promise me it won't happen again!' – 'You have my word'²⁶) are absurd.

Yes, Havel, in *Ztížená možnost soustředění* turns the parasitic, meaningless and stereotyped lives of his protagonists into a dizzying whirlwind of chaotic and fragmentary statements, underlining the absolute degradation of humanity and the loss of personal identity. However, it is important to point out that as early as the 1960s Havel began to record violence by (ageing) men against women in an almost documentary way. It must be stressed again that these women have no defence against this.

It is interesting to look at secondary literature. The authors of seminal studies on Czech drama, Paul I. Trensky²⁷ and Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz²⁸ both interpret *Ztížená možnost soustředění* as a drama about the stereotyping and meaninglessness of human life, which the play expresses through the constant repetition of fragmentary statements and almost identical scenes. According to Trensky, Huml's childless marriage is 'in an advanced state of sterility', so Huml finds an extramarital relationship, but it soon descends into the same sterility as his marriage. So, Huml sets his sights on a 'seductive but resistant' secretary. Incredibly, even Trensky interprets the situation exclusively from the male character's point of view, that is, from the point of view of power, not from the point of view of the victim. There is no mention of the unequal power relationship between Huml and the three women in Trensky's text, nor does the author perceive the attitudes and feelings of the affected women, except perhaps to note that 'Huml's lies are accepted by both women as a kind of perverted version of his affection'.²⁹

Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz observes that Vlasta, Huml's wife, and Renata, his mistress, put pressure on Huml, and Huml tries to balance their demands.³⁰ Blanka, the secretary, is not mentioned by Goetz-Stankiewicz at all, and her text implies indirectly that Huml's wife and mistress are somehow guilty of something for bothering him in the first place. The feelings of the women around Huml are also curiously not dealt with at all. For both Trensky and Goetz-Stankiewicz, Huml's behaviour is implicitly unproblematic; the fundamental theme of the play is something else, namely the abuse of language in order to achieve power and material gains. Neither Stankiewicz nor Trensky deal with the abuse of women in Havel's plays at all; the two books were published in 1978 and 1979, a different era.

Horský hotel (1976), though completed after *Žebrácká opera* (1975), has arguably a stronger connection to the earlier play, *Ztížená možnost soustředění*, than to *Žebrácká opera*, so let us mention that play first. According to the author, it is an experimental 'stage composition of movements and speeches'.³¹ Here again Havel experiments with

the analysis of the loss of individual human identity. Their banal pronouncements, once the characters of the play have been established on stage, begin to detach themselves from their personalities, and all the characters repeat in fragments everything that has already been said. Importantly, for Havel, self-indulgent sexual relationships in this play are another sign of deepening inhumanity and loss of human identity. In *Horský hotel*, we find a new variation on sexual interactions as they occur in *Ztížená možnost soustředění*. Whereas in that play scientist Huml said the same things to his wife and to his mistress, in *Horský hotel*, it is the other way around: the character of the ageing man Pechar splits: In his relationship with his wife he is a helpless pensioner, whose wife forces him to wear a jumper, takes his temperature and makes him swallow aspirin for no good reason. In his relationship with the waitress Milena he turns into two very active lovers who are jealous of each other and strongly reproach Milena for her relationship with their other incarnation. Havel also gradually develops here the motif from *Ztížená možnost soustředění* (or, in fact, from *Vyrozumění*, when the liquidated idealist, the secretary Marie, is moved by Gross's buck-passing speech – 'Nobody ever talked to me so nicely before!'),³² namely the motif of women's incredible tolerance of men's shocking behaviour. In *Ztížená možnost soustředění*, Huml's wife tolerates his mistress. In *Horský hotel*, a wife's reluctant tolerance of infidelity in *Ztížená možnost soustředění* goes much further: Pechar's wife actively encourages him to commit infidelity with Milena. The same motif then ironically appears in *Žebrácká opera*, when Peachum is being persuaded by both his friend – the owner of the brothel – and by his own wife that he should have a mistress for the sake of his reputation. Interestingly, there is almost nothing else going on in *Horský hotel* except love-making and extramarital affairs. Could this be the focal point of human existence for Havel at this juncture in his life?

In *Žebrácká opera*, Havel perfected the theme of multilayered lying, i.e. the deceitful manipulation of everyone by everyone to such an extent that, as a result of multiple lies, we end up in a dizzying situation where we never really know what the truth is. Almost all the characters are constantly striving for power, and this power tug-of-war, according to Havel, naturally includes sexual relations. Again, it is all about submission and domination, about 'achieving pleasure' and the 'excellent reputation' that supposedly arises from unbridled promiscuity in men. It is never about love – love is degraded and discredited. In this play, even parents want to sell their young daughter for sex in order to achieve power. The child, however, has already been trained at home to lie, and so she cheats on them as well. Havel presents this depressing, dehumanizing situation with irony and tongue-in-cheek humour, entertainingly, which is why *Žebrácká opera* is one of his more popular dramatic works. The abuse of language is treated ironically in *Žebrácká opera*. Havel also presents ironically the language of Diana, the brothel owner, who is utterly without morals or awareness that her 'business' is ethically unacceptable. Diana speaks as if running prostitutes were a legitimate trade:

Imagine that my salon has been discovered by nobility. I engaged a few new girls a while ago, mostly between sixteen and twenty, somehow the word got out, and the salon is now incredibly busy. Naturally, I immediately raised the fees [...] The changed social structure of my clientele has [...] also placed new demands on the equipment of my salon. [...] Well, times are changing, Mr. Peachum, after all, we live in the second half of the eighteenth century, there's nothing to be done about it! Gentlemen used to win the popularity and respect of the common people by their bravery on the battlefield, now they do it in ladies' bedrooms

and drawing rooms! [...] When the common man in the street sees that a duke is actually a man like him – flesh and blood, with his passions, vices and worries – he inevitably feels kinship with him and takes a greater liking to him! A sort of subconscious identification, you see? And I am surprised that you – such a good psychologist – have not noticed this and have not drawn the consequences for yourself.³³

The linguistic irony, which formerly derided the enslaving political, ideological language, is now focused on the sexual theme. Diana convinces Peachum to acquire a mistress for the sake of his own popularity and offers to arrange this for him. As mentioned above, the culmination of a wife's tolerance of her husband's infidelity is the fact that Peachum's wife actively supports Peachum in taking a mistress. While Havel's previous characters used modern, pseudo-scientific, rational jargon in order to enslave people by means of ideology, the protagonists of *Žebrácká opera* use this kind of language for sexual matters. The euphemistic cloak of the vague formality of this language hides a reality that the audience would be unwilling to accept if it were named directly for what it is.

Žebrácká opera does not only feature ageing men seeking sexual relationships with young girls – Macheath is an attractive man in his prime. Even in this play, however, the purpose of sex is purely utilitarian, a matter of power, an instrument for gaining popularity or power, by both men and women. Thus, for example, Macheath flaunts his sexual accomplishments:

MACHEATH, I do not deny that I am indeed a very successful womanizer. Of the ten girls that I lust after, I usually get nine into one of my beds sooner or later. The only reason why I do not get some of these girls into bed is that I cannot simply devote more time to their seduction.³⁴

The role of sex as an instrument of gaining power in the *Žebrácká opera* society is underscored by Peachum's willingness to exploit the genuine feelings of his daughter Polly, forcing her to have an (insincere) affair with Macheath, perhaps even to marry him, so that she can act as a spy for her father in Macheath's camp. The play also features typical Havelesque, 'highly convincing' buck-passing monologues, such as the speeches of the prostitute Jenny, who many times betrays Macheath to the police, and then each time eloquently convinces him that she did not mean to do this at all. Just as Huml tries to arouse his mistress's interest in him in *Ztížená možnost sousředení* by recalling alleged romantic scenes the two have experienced in the past (Count Orlov does this to the young girl Lisa in *Horský hotel*), in *Žebrácká opera*, this emotional manipulation absolutely blossoms:

If you only knew how intensely I have been thinking of you! Every day I pictured in my mind's eye a small country castle built of red bricks, overgrown with ivy and surrounded by green meadows and beech groves, and the two of us farming there together, chasing greyhounds through those meadows, riding horses, hunting rare game, bathing in the nearby river, mushroom picking, cooking Old English meals, throwing parties for the local gentry, growing sunflowers – and then, in the evenings, sitting by the great Renaissance fireplace, gazing into the fire, talking about our childhood, reading together old books from the castle library, sipping mead – and then, slightly intoxicated, retiring to the castle bedroom – the fragrant summer air streaming in through the window, the sound of a thousand cicadas coming from the meadows, the pale light of a million stars falling from the sky – and undressing in a daze and lying down together in the great Gothic canopy bed, kissing each other tenderly for a long time, and then making love over and over again – our hot tanned

bodies intertwined in wild love spasms – and then finally, happy and sweetly exhausted, falling asleep – to be awakened the next morning by the sparkling summer sun, the birds singing, and the butler bringing us ham and eggs and cocoa.³⁵

In a typical Havelesque insouciant monologue, Macheath explains to the furious girls Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit why he has married them both and thus committed bigamy:

Girls! I respect your anger, and I understand your pain, for I know that the superficial aspect of my conduct may indeed invite the interpretation which your disturbed minds give it. However, precisely because I understand your feelings, and more so because I myself know best how many faults I have, I must resolutely defend myself in everything where you have demonstrably accused me unjustly, simply because your emotions prevent you from seeing the real human content of my actions beneath the surface. First, it is not true that I do not love you. [...] What am I guilty of, then? Was it wrong that I married you? But what else could I have done if I loved you? Of course: the more usual, because more acceptable to society and more convenient for men, is today a somewhat different procedure, namely, that of a man taking only one of the beloved women as his wife, and the other one – on the pretext of respect for his legitimate wife – being consigned to the degrading position of a so-called mistress, that is, a sort of better courtesan, whose duties are almost identical to those of a wife, but whose rights are considerably curtailed in comparison with those of a wife ...³⁶

The last three of Havel's plays written during the communist era date from the 1980s, after Havel's almost five-year imprisonment, and they are extremely depressing. *Largo desolato* (1984) is a portrait of the broken-down dissident philosopher Leopold Kopřiva, who constantly fears the arrival of the secret police and is obsessed with looking through the peep-hole in his front door, fearing their arrival. When they finally do arrive, they try to persuade him to sign a paper that some subversive philosophical essay was not written by him. Towards the end of the play, the secret police return to Kopřiva's apartment again, saying that there is no longer any need for such a statement, as it is obvious that Kopřiva's identity has completely disintegrated.

But let us turn our attention to the 'love' issues in Kopřiva's middle-class household and in his relatively ostentatious apartment. There are rather strange relationships in this household, and it is again an elaboration of relationship situations from Havel's previous plays. We have already noted the odd fact that the male characters in Havel's previous plays inform their wives as well as their mistresses of exactly what they are doing with the other women in their amorous games, or that the wife encourages the man to take, or deepen his relationship with, a mistress. The situation is very similar in *Largo desolato* and makes us wonder to what extent the situation in this play is a reflection of the situation in the Havel household. After all, Havel himself writes in his 'Notes for Stage Directors', in the preface to the Munich edition of *Largo desolato*:

I have always based my writing on what I know, on my experience of that world in which I live and on my experience of myself. I have always written, in short, about what I experience, what I see, what interests and troubles me – I could not possibly base my writing on anything else.³⁷

Kieran Williams, in his recent biography of Václav Havel,³⁸ expresses the view that the relationship situation in *Largo desolato* is a direct reflection of the conditions in Havel's household after his return from prison. During Havel's imprisonment, his wife Olga

Havlová had an affair with a younger man, the photographer Jan Kašpar, whom Havel knew well. Williams writes:

[Olga Havlová] did not want a divorce [...] and she would still care for Havel in a motherly or sisterly way, but she now had her own circle of friends and underground activities.³⁹

(He quotes this from biographies of Václav Havel by Kosatík⁴⁰ and Žantovský.⁴¹) According to Williams, Havel was disoriented, had his own extramarital affairs,⁴² and the real crisis in his relationship with Olga Havlová was caused by the pregnancy of his mistress, Jitka Vodňanská.

The relationship situation in Kopřiva's household in *Largo desolato* is indeed unusual. His wife Zuzana lives there and takes care of Kopřiva with her purchases (once she manages to buy liver, the second time she manages to find cauliflower in the shops, she takes care of everyday material concerns, for example, and she is annoyed that Kopřiva and Lucy scrubbed the non-stick pan with a wire scrubber⁴³). But she has an independent life with Olda, with whom she goes to the cinema or to the ball and ignores Kopřiva's suggestions to have dinner together or discuss various topics. Kopřiva has a mistress, Lucy, who has a completely friendly relationship with his wife. Zuzana hugs Lucy. Zuzana's partner Olda has friendly conversations with Kopřiva in the apartment, especially about his health, asking him about various intimate physiological manifestations of his body. The interest of these characters in shopping and these physiological manifestations seem to highlight the subject of materialism that has been present in Havel's plays since *Vyrozumění*.

In *Largo desolato*, the theme of dissidents being regarded by the general public as institutionalized defenders of human rights also reappears after *Protest*: one of the main problems of the play is that everyone constantly wants something from the disintegrated Kopřiva. Everyone constantly makes heavy demands on him. How futile all these efforts are in the advanced normalization of the 1980s is signalled by the statement of one of the two 'Láďas', two 'ordinary people' who admire dissident Kopřiva and who have stolen a large amount of blank paper for him at the paper mill where they work and demand political action from him – as everyone does. Láďa tragicomically bids farewell to Kopřiva when he leaves – in 1984, a full 16 years after the defeat of the Prague Spring – with the famous slogan 'We are with you, you be with us' from the dramatic days of the summer of 1968, when the nation, despite pressure from the East German communist leader Ulbricht and the Soviet leader Brezhnev, supported the Dubček leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia with this slogan.

Even Kopřiva's mistress Lucy makes demands on him, namely she expects open displays of affection. Kopřiva is not capable of this. It is not about love; it is just about sex. 'Shall we go to bed instead?' Kopřiva suggests to Lucy in response to her demands. Emotions are irrelevant, only Kopřiva's desire for sex survives. It is the same towards the end of the play, where Leopold Kopřiva's young admirer, the philosophy student Markéta, appears. Although Kopřiva tells her that he is a psychological wreck, he nevertheless – quite against Markéta's will – makes her drink large amounts of rum (the girl always shudders after drinking another glass) in order to seduce her. Sex is portrayed as a self-indulgent pleasure, which ageing men seek at all times, without any individual interest in the person they want to seduce. *Largo desolato* also continues the 'meme' from Havel's previous plays that it is not enough for male characters to have one wife

and one mistress, since men soon become bored with both of them, but that it is necessary to try – without any emotional involvement – to seduce more and more ‘victims’.

In *Pokoušení*, several established Havel themes re-appear in new variations. Again, we have a triangle/quadrangle, sexual relationship. Dr. Foustka and his associate Vilma have a strange, much-worn-out love affair, and Vilma again, as in *Largo desolato*, is always demanding various things from her partner, tiresomely from his point of view. She wants him to contrive scenes of jealousy for her, Foustka even commits violence against her, and this is supposed to arouse her. What are we to make of the quality of Foustka and Vilma’s relationship from this scene?

The DANCER leaves; VILMA shuts the door, smiles uncertainly at FOUSTKA, lays the violets down on the table, comes up to FOUSTKA and kisses him gently on the forehead, cheeks and mouth. FOUSTKA stands as if rooted to the spot gazing coldly in front of him.

VILMA, I love you –

*FOUSTKA doesn’t bat an eyelid, as VILMA goes on kissing him. Then suddenly, FOUSTKA slaps her brutally across the face; VILMA falls to the ground; FOUSTKA kicks her. The curtain falls.*⁴⁴

The next morning, Vilma shows up at work with a large bruise under her eye. She says to Foustka, ‘It was a good night, last night, wasn’t it? I can’t remember when we made love so beautifully ...’. FOUSTKA: ‘Mmm.’ When a co-worker asks Vilma what it is under her eye, Vilma responds by saying: ‘Unbridled passion, what else’.⁴⁵

But, of course, Foustka is keen to seduce the young secretary, Markéta. The strange figure of Fistula, who may or may not be the devil, offers, as proof of his supernatural powers, that Markéta will miraculously, *briefly*,⁴⁶ fall in love with Foustka. (‘What if tonight at that social of yours she was to fall in love with you? Unexpectedly and of course, just for a short time? How about that?’⁴⁷) This happens, and Markéta immediately becomes a typical idealistic figure who, in an environment of general lying and manipulation, must be destroyed. During an official investigation of Dr. Foustka on suspicion that he secretly indulges in thoroughly non-Marxist occult practices, she publicly defends her idol to the head of the Institute. Just as Gross in *Vyrozumění* does not lift a finger to save Marie, similarly, Foustka does nothing for Markéta; she is fired from the institute, attempts suicide, and ends up in an insane asylum. Typically, like all the (ageing) men in Havel’s plays, Foustka ‘woos’ Markéta and does not care that he already has a partner in Vilma. It is a deception of both Vilma and Markéta. The motivation is selfishness. After all, it all takes place in a situation of oppression, cynicism and general lying and manipulation, so as usual we never find out where the truth lies. Foustka eventually loses Vilma too, when he suspects that she has denounced him to the head of the institute, and a typically Havelesque attempt at manipulation by recalling a long-ago romantic experience together (‘Do you remember what we said to each other that day by the river under the elms?’⁴⁸) does not work on Vilma – as it does not work on any women in all the previous plays by Havel.

A new phenomenon in the field of sexual relations in this play is the fact that the head of the research Institute is a homosexual and abuses his position of power to rape his male subordinates, first trying to rape Foustka, then another employee. Everyone takes it as a normal thing.

In *Asanace (Redevelopment)* a parodic depiction of Gorbachev’s ‘reforms’ as they must have appeared to Czechoslovaks in the late 1980s, the elderly architect Ulč tries to woo the young girl Renata, even explaining ‘I also have a sex drive’,⁴⁹ but the love relationships

are muddled between and among several characters. Bergman, the cowardly chief architect, and his lover Luisa suffer from a typical tired relationship which Bergman spices up with his constant threats to commit suicide, which Luisa correctly interprets as mere attention-seeking. Like numerous Havesque characters in previous plays, Bergman tries to arouse Luisa's interest in him by recalling old romantic episodes they once both experienced. This time, he does it in gratuitous detail. But Luisa is platonically loved by the young idealist Albert – Luisa, like the previous characters, quite openly shares his declaration of love with Bergman, Bergman then publicly uses this against Albert. In the meantime, young Renata falls unhappily in love with Albert. Numerous motifs from Havel's previous plays appear in the intricate mix of these love relationships, but they are not developed to the same extent as in his previous plays; the playwright's interest is in the unconcealed and brutal political power to which all the characters in *Asanace* are subordinate and over whose transformations they have no influence.

Havel's last play, *Odcházení* (*Leaving*), written after the fall of Communism, initially received relatively negative reviews.⁵⁰ Critics complained that Havel was allegedly just rehashing his old themes. To some extent this is true: throughout all his plays Havel reveals his recurrent style and uses the same motifs, although he often alters them and plays with variations on them. Obviously, each of Havel's successive plays must be read in an intercultural context with his previous plays, as if they all were a single work and a single literary-dramatic structure. The text of the play is almost identical with Havel's 2011 film of the same name. The only difference is that the intercessions of the authorial voice that comments on the play throughout, have been removed from the film, except for the last one.

Odcházení, like all Havel's other plays, states that there is a brazen struggle going on in society for power and riches, with the combatants unashamed to use any means of manipulation, lies and violence. In Havel's previous plays, written before 1989, the protagonists seeking power and the subjugation of people around them use communist ideology as a tool of power; in *Odcházení*, right-wing ideology and the idea of boundless freedom in which everything is allowed are used.

In *Odcházení*, we also find motifs that tie in with the current #MeToo movement, although they seem relatively weak, compared to some of Havel's previous plays. Rieger, a 60-year-old former national leader, has 'a forty-year-old girlfriend'.⁵¹ It is worth noting that this is a typical expression of selfishness on Rieger's part: he has been with Irena for 15 years, but has never married her. Why? 'My long-time girlfriend' is the constant epithet for Irene in this play. Like many of the women in Havel's previous plays, Irena keeps the Rieger household running, and as in previous plays, starting with *Vyrozuštění* ('May I go and get the rolls?')⁵², there is a remarkable emphasis on the most mundane material aspects of the existence of Rieger's household. The servant Osvald must cook and peel the potatoes that the departing country leader's family will eat 'with cottage cheese and butter'⁵³ (why such a simple meal? Does Havel emphasize the ordinariness of the Rieger household's aspirations?), he must take out the garbage and hang out the laundry, but 'correctly', only according to Irena's precise orders. As in *Largo desolato*, a burnt frying pan is again a problem in *Odcházení*: should it be scrubbed clean or thrown away?⁵⁴ In addition to potatoes with cottage cheese and butter, the play also talks obsessively about fruit (brought by the daughter Vlasta) and cherries (a reference to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which apparently inspired to some extent the

course of the conversations in this Havel drama – Chekhov’s characters frequently talking at cross purposes). Rieger’s ‘long-time girlfriend’ has some of the traits of the female characters from Havel’s previous plays: just as in *Horský hotel*, the wife forces Pechar to wear a vest so that he does not catch cold, Irena forces Rieger to wrap himself in a blanket. Both men refuse their women’s care. Irena sends the grandmother home because ‘cold emanates from the ground’. Pecharová repeats the exact same sentence to Pechar in the *Horský hotel*.⁵⁵

In *Odcházení*, influence, power, and property are once again overtly at stake. Rieger’s daughter Vlasta tries to force the former country leader to sign over everything he owns to her. The former country leader and his family are evicted from their government-owned residence to some cottage in the countryside, ‘only a hundred versts away’ by the new ruling team, and the defeated Rieger eventually submits to blackmail and becomes an advisor to an advisor to an advisor of the new ruler Klein.

Even in *Odcházení* we find a potential sexual relationship of the ageing man Rieger to a young girl. As in *Largo desolato* and in *Asanace*, it is always a woman who has ‘deeply studied, as an academic expert’ the ageing man’s life, opinions, and pronouncements, and/or is enthusiastically interested in them. In *Odcházení*, however, we have a change: while Rieger is of course interested in self-indulgent sex with a young female, the girl, Bea Weisenmütelhof, a ‘political scientist and multicultural sociopsychologist’, is obsessed with Rieger for his supposed power (in this, she is a variation on Helga from Havel’s early play *Spiklenci*), and so, discovering he has none, by the end of the play, she begins to cling to the new autocrat Klein. Another change in *Odcházení* is Irena’s attitude towards Rieger’s attempted infidelity; unlike the previous Havel women, Irena does not support Rieger in his attempts at promiscuity, instead she lapses into a hysterical fit of jealousy. ‘You have no idea what love is! You’re as cynical as the rest of you!’⁵⁶ She is, of course, right about that.

* * *

While it was not exactly unknown in the West for bosses to hit on their secretaries, or professors on students, and the 60s and 70s were famous for their obsession with sex in culture, there is also a clearly Communist context which allows, encourages, licences it,

said one of the peer reviewers of this article, continuing with a question: ‘I see how Havel resembles MeToo criticisms. How does he differ from them?’

Let us re-state in conclusion that perhaps the main difference in Havel’s approach, when compared to the approach of the #MeToo movement today is that Havel presents the abuse of young women by ageing men as an integral part of the shameless and arrogant quest for power, a quest which he has been criticizing from the very beginning, in all of his plays. Havel sees communism as an opportunity for unscrupulous characters to get on top, at the end of his life (*Odcházení*), he also sees capitalism as such an opportunity. In Havel’s view, society is dominated by individuals who will use anything in order to subjugate their fellow human beings, starting of course with the abuse of ideological language. Undoubtedly, the contemporary #MeToo movement condemns the abuse of women by men also as a manifestation of power. I would argue, however, that in Havel, the connection with greed for power is much stronger. Manipulating young women into bed is, maybe, in Havel’s view, just a subset of this relentless quest for power. Such an obsession brings about absurdity in society. We have shown in this

article that according to Havel, enslavement of women is part and parcel of creating this absurdity. It is remarkable that no one to day has actually pointed this out. Maybe, for most authors, the predicament of women did not matter.

In this connection, however, let us introduce a word of caution. Most of Václav Havel's plays are sharply critical of life in Czech society. They mock it and show it as grotesque, exactly because it is dominated by individuals who strive for power. However, we find a certain ambiguity in the attitude of Havel's plays that creates tension. When depicting in his plays how ageing men behave towards young women, did he really mean it as criticism? As Havel himself said, he often simply recorded what existed, what he knew from his life experience and his environment. As we know, Havel himself behaved to women in a way which resembled the behaviour of the ageing men in his plays. What if the scenes of sexual manipulation which we have been discussed in this article were not intended as criticism of this behaviour, but were included in the plays only as a simple record of what normally happens? Maybe these scenes have become shocking only from today's perspective. Maybe only from that perspective do we interpret them as criticism of this unacceptable practice.

Notes

1. Čulík, "The Theatre of the Absurd" (see Bibliography).
2. See Čulík, "Václav Havel."
3. Global Gender Gap Index Rankings.
4. Premiered in December 1963, published in 1964.
5. "We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an eruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*). Vol. 1, 5.
6. These letters were written when Havel was in prison in 1979–1982, they were first published in Czech by Josef and Zdena Škvorecký's publishing house 68 Publishers in Toronto in 1985. Havel explains in the Preface to these letters that the prison wardens would refuse to post his letters to his wife if they were clear and concise. He learned that in order to pass through the prison censorship, they needed to be written in a convoluted, theoretical, pseudo-philosophical style.
7. Apart from these, he also produced several early and occasional works.
8. Havel, *Vyrozumění*. In *Protokoly*, 188. In English: *Havel: Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 99.
9. *Ibid.*, 193, in English 104.
10. *Ibid.*, 157, in English 69.
11. 'Normalisation' was Gustáv Husák's term for the political clampdown after the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968. Gustáv Husák was an originally reformist CP official from 1968 who saw his chance after the invasion, ingratiated himself to the Russians and managed to replace the reformist CP leader Alexander Dubček, presiding over a harsh political clampdown in Czechoslovakia for the next 20 years. His 'normalisation' period lasted from 1970 until the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989. After the exhilarating period of intense civic activism in 1968, Husák's regime required that the Czechoslovak citizens leave the public space. In return they were awarded by consumerism: colour TVs, Škoda cars and second homes in the countryside.
12. *Želary* is the name of a mountain village where Czech citizens hide the nurse Eliška after her lover, a surgeon in a Brno hospital, is found by the Gestapo to be an active member of the Czech resistance. But the Czechs, as depicted in this film, refuse to rebel against an oppressive

regime and those people who help Eliška to hide in the mountains do so with reservations. Resistance against an oppressive regime is regarded as self-indulgent and foolish in several Czech films made since the year 2000; see, for instance, also *Habermannův mlýn* (*Habermann's Mill*, 2010) and *Pouta* (*Walking Too Fast*, 2010). The local doctor, the teacher and the priest in Želary certainly offer help, but they consider taking part in the resistance movement irresponsible, doing so could harm innocent people. Perhaps that is how all people who have long experience of life under oppression behave. They prefer to solve problems by subterfuge rather than by direct confrontation. See Čulík, *Jací jsme*, 158 and Čulík, *A Society in Distress*, 73–4.

13. Havel, *Hry 1970–1976*, 266. In English: *Havel: Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 209.
14. The play was written in July 1984 within four days. It was first published by the emigré publishing house Obrys/Kontur – Poezie mimo Domov, Munich 1985. In English in: Havel, *Selected Plays: 1984–1987*.
15. In English in: Havel, *Selected Plays: 1984–1987*.
16. In English in: Havel, *Selected Plays: 1984–1987*.
17. Václav Havel: 'At my inner crossroads [I] stood at a moment of profound change in the whole world around me: August 1968 was not just the usual exchange of a more liberal regime for a more conservative one, [it was] the end of an era, [...] the whole existing world collapsed, the world in which we were already so well settled, [...] namely the peaceful, slightly comic, slightly disintegrated and very Biedermeier world of the 1960s.' Havel, *Hry 1970–1976*, 306.
18. The premiere of Havel's film of *Odcházení* (*Leaving*) took place on 15th November 2011, a mere month before Havel's death on 18th December 2011.
19. Havel, *Protokoly*, 217–18. In English: *Havel: Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 128–9.
20. 'SLÁDEK: O čem byly ty vaše hry? VANĚK: Hlavně o úřednících.' Havel, *Hry 1970–1976*, 246 – in English: 'MALTSTER: What did you use to write those plays about anyway? VANĚK: Mainly about bureaucrats.' Havel, *Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 188.
21. Václav Havel, *Ztížená možnost soustředění*, 9, 10, 13, 15. In English: Havel, *Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 133, 137, 138.
22. *Ibid.*, 19. In English 142.
23. *Ibid.*, 16. In English 139.
24. *Ibid.*, 35, 45. In English 156, 166.
25. *Ibid.*, 44. In English 165.
26. *Ibid.*, 22, 43. In English 145, 164.
27. Trensky, *Czech Drama Since World War II*.
28. Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*.
29. Trensky, *Czech Drama Since World War II*, 120.
30. Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, 57.
31. Havel, *Hry 1970–1976*, 309.
32. Havel, *Protokoly*, 218. In English: *Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 129.
33. Havel, *Hry 1970–1976*, 110–11 (Jan Čulík's translation).
34. *Ibid.*, 115 (Jan Čulík's translation).
35. *Ibid.*, 138–9 (Jan Čulík's translation) – By the way, 'bathing in the nearby river', 'our hot tanned bodies' – Havel evidently had no idea what the summer weather in England is like. But maybe the English weather was better in the eighteenth century ... ?
36. *Ibid.*, 160–1 (Jan Čulík's translation).
37. Havel, *Largo desolato*, 93 (Jan Čulík's translation).
38. Williams, *Václav Havel*, 146–7.
39. *Ibid.*, 146.
40. Kosatík, *„Člověk má dělat to, nač má sílu“: Život Olgy Havlové*, 235–50.
41. Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, 245.
42. Playwright Alex Koenigsmark (1944–2013) testified to the author of this article about the conditions in Havel's household in the 1980s. The banned actor Pavel Landovský was invited to the premiere of his play in Kraków, Poland, so he decided to go there in his car and took Koenigsmark with him. On the way, they stopped at the Havel's country residence in Hrádeček,

where they planned to spend the night. In the evening Havel decided to go to the nearby city of Trutnov and 'bring some girls'. He did bring three young girls back to Hrádeček in a taxi. Olga Havlová was very upset by this and shut herself in her room. Koenigsmark testified that the situation was embarrassing. The point of his story, however, was something else. When he and Landovský eventually arrived in Kraków, it turned out that the theatre was closed, nobody was there and there was no performance. Landovský produced an invitation which gave the date of the premiere of his play in the month called 'kwiecień' ('květen' in Czech means 'May'). Neither Koenigsmark nor Landovský knew at that time that 'kwiecień' means April in Polish.

43. Havel, *Largo desolato*, 58. In English Havel, *Selected Plays 1984–1987*. See also here: <https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/playtext-detail?docid=do-9780571289905&tocid=do-9780571289905-div-00000004&actid=do-9780571289905-div-00000010>.
44. Havel, *Pokoušení*, 51. In English: Havel, *Temptation*, 29–30.
45. Ibid., 53. In English 31 – Amy Mackinnon, a former student of Czech Studies at the University of Glasgow and now a Russian and security analyst employed by the American journal *Foreign Policy*, was surprised how often Czech films contain often completely gratuitous violence against women.
46. Surely this is crucial for selfish, self-indulgent sexual encounters with women.
47. Havel, *Pokoušení*, 31. In English: Havel, *Temptation*, 15 – Foustka knows, of course, that this is all about self-indulgence, and protests: 'Do you think I'm so badly off that I must use magic to help me with women? I'm not some dirty old man conducting experiments on unsuspecting innocent young virgins for his own sexual gratification!' (in Czech, 31–2, in English 16). Underlined by JČ.
48. Ibid., 86. In English 55.
49. Václav Havel, *Asanace*, 53. In English in Havel, *Selected Plays 1984–1987*. See also <https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/playtext-overview?docid=do-9780571289905&tocid=do-9780571289905-div-00000033&st>.
50. For instance, see Spáčilová, "Odcházení."
51. Havel, *Odcházení*, 3.
52. Havel, *Vyrozumnění*. In *Protokoly*, 188. In English: Havel, *Selected Plays 1963–1983*, 99.
53. Havel, *Odcházení*, 9.
54. Ibid., 3.
55. Havel, *Horský hotel*. In *Hry 1970–1976*, 193.
56. Havel, *Odcházení*, 24.

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ORCID

Jan Čulík  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8359-8807>

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